

Wednesday, July 24, 2013

Dentists and Umpires, Advocating Safety



What do you say to patients/friends who ask about recent headline news of infection control problems in the dental office? I think about two types of professionals—umpires and dentists—as I read recent stories about dentistry and infection control issues.

I tell my patients and neighbors that infection control in the dentist's office is like umpires in baseball: no one notices the umpires until they make a bad call. Then, all of a sudden, they are on the front page of the sports section. One or two umpires/dentists may make a bad call, and all of the umpires/dentists are put under a microscope.

News of questionable infection control procedures in a dental office in Tulsa, Okla., and here in Marana, make this an ideal time to talk about how you can educate your patients and friends about infection control and their safety.

As a dentist and delegate of the Arizona Dental Association, I can tell you that organized dentistry welcomes any and all questions that folks have concerning their dental health. They are a great resource in calming patient fears and explaining what standards they should expect.

Encourage your neighbors and patients to be their own advocate. If they think the office is dirty, go somewhere else. If they notice the dentist or staff not changing into new gloves or disinfecting or washing their hands, speak up immediately to the dentist or staff member.

I hope those who have read accounts of the incidents notice just how many organizations were involved in exposing the story. The County Health Department, OSHA and the news media are all part of keeping patients safe. Dentists must take infection control very seriously. The diseases we are talking about can become a larger problem, as they may not manifest themselves until much later.

As I tell my patients, every dentist in the U.S. is acutely aware that if they do not follow the rules, regulations and guidelines for infection control, they can expect repercussions. Dentists can face penalties such as suspension or loss of license if someone gets sick or is injured. Malpractice suits are always a possibility if the omissions are deemed egregious and restitution to the patient is ruled appropriate.

Our office is very close to the Mexican border. Patients in this area must realize that the strict guidelines and penalties for infection control in the U.S. do not exist in Mexico. Practitioners are not held to the same standards, penalties and transparency as we are here.

A poor dental restoration affects only one person, but a communicable disease can affect a family and a community.

With these talking points, we all should be confident and proud of how we keep our patients safe and the standards that we have in place in this country.

Enjoy the journey,

Bob Oro, DMD, MAGD